THE WIKI WAY

Thanks to Boston College senior Marie Pellissier, the online encyclopedia Wikipedia now has an entry on a pioneering woman of the American West, Susan LaFlesche Picotte.

For an assignment last semester in Professor of History Marilynn Johnson’s course History of the American West, Pellissier introduced “Wiki” to Picotte (1865-1915), widely considered to be the first Native American woman to become a physician.

“I wanted to focus on a strong woman who was able to influence life in the West,” Pellissier told the WikiEducation Foundation, which featured the history major, and noted using her use of Boston College Libraries resources to write her article, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_La_Flesche_Picotte.

“I’m delighted that Marie’s research has resulted in such a tangible and accessible contribution to historical knowledge on the web,” said Johnson.

“Wikipedia is here to stay, so why not improve it? There are tons of entries on male explorers and military figures in the American West, but not nearly as many on women and Native Americans. Marie’s article gives us both.”

Pellissier hopes readers of the article “come away with a sense of just how extraordinary this woman was. I think one of the most interesting things about Picotte is the way she was able to have an impact on, and earn the respect of, both the Omaha nation and the community of whites living around their reservation in Waldhill, Neb.

“Though she was at a double disadvantage, as a woman and as a Native American, she persisted in pursuing her education to become a doctor and in pushing for significant improvements to public health on the Omaha reservation,” she added. “She earned respect at a time when women were expected to stay home and care for families instead of working in a public sphere.”

Pellissier described Johnson’s assignment as “extraordinary: It asked us as historians to think differently about how we write; it was a challenge to write in an encyclopedic style.

“Writing for a broad audience,” she added, “really enhanced the experience in the class because instead of writing a research paper that only the professor would read, we were challenged to think about how to bring an interesting topic to a much broader group of people.”

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